

# Defining Steps in Jesus' Journey ... And Ours

## Finding our people

Exodus 20: 1-17; Mark 3: 20-35

Sermon Preached at Foundry United Methodist Church  
on Sunday, March 23, 2003  
by Rev. Dean Snyder

Prayer: Calm our hearts, O Lord of life, so that, in the midst of all the noise and contention without and within, we may hear your voice. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Lately, I have been taking Thursdays as my Sabbath. I spent Thursday this week flipping between ABC and CNN - not a very Sabbath-like way to spend the day.

I confess that by Friday morning I was hopeful that the armies of Iraq might simply surrender and the war might be over without more bombing or bloodshed. (I think this is called denial.)

Then on Friday the bombing began in earnest, shock and awe.

I, like you, am saddened. Yet, I'd like to suggest that, even in the midst of war, there are things for which we can be grateful: that there are not more casualties than there are. (Of course, those who have lost loved ones, American, British or Iraqi, have lost their whole world, so this is of little comfort to them, I'm sure.) But we can be grateful that casualties have not been more extensive than they are.

We can be grateful that no biological, chemical or nuclear weapons have yet been used.

I am grateful for those Iraqi soldiers who saved their lives and the lives of others by choosing to surrender rather than to fight. It must be very difficult to transcend feelings of patriotism and risk accusations of cowardice by choosing not to fight. So I am grateful to the Iraqi soldiers who have chosen not to fight.

I am grateful to the American and British soldiers who have treated Iraqi soldiers and citizens compassionately. It must be difficult not to hate and dehumanize your enemy on the battle field. To see surrendering Iraqi soldiers and Iraqi citizens being treated humanely is a blessing.

I know there are conflicting opinions about this, but I am grateful for the presence of the press in this war, and for reporters who seek to tell us the truth objectively and impartially. I know the press has taken a lot of criticism over the past decade, but I firmly believe that a free and independent press is the linchpin of democracy, and I am grateful for Pentagon's decision to give the press access to this war and the willingness of reporters to do their jobs.

I am grateful that there have been no acts of terrorism here in the U.S.

There are, of course, many things that deeply worry me. I am worried about soldiers whose lives are at risk and their families. I am worried about civilians living in the midst of this war. I am worried about what the world's people, especially Arab and Muslim peoples, think we are doing.

So this is a time of prayer.

I want to say that I am grateful for the way Foundry has remained a center of prayer and community in the

midst of all that is happening. We here who are Foundry Church are not of one mind about this war, yet we have shared together in prayers for peace and justice and a world where people and children are safe and secure.

Foundry has in our membership those who are pacifists. Our United Methodist Social Principles include these words: "Some of us [meaning United Methodists] believe that war and other acts of violence are never acceptable to Christians. ... We honor the witness of pacifists who will not allow us to become complacent about war and violence." I want to echo that: I honor the pacifists in our midst here at Foundry.

I myself am not a pacifist. I believe that pacifism is right. I think that war is not the answer. I think war only ultimately breeds more war. I have at times in my life tried to be a pacifist. I wish I were a pacifist.

But I find myself agreeing with this statement from our United Methodist Social Principles. After affirming the pacifists in our midst, the Social Principles say: "We also acknowledge that most Christians regretfully realize that, when peaceful alternatives have failed, the force of arms may be preferable to unchecked aggression, tyranny and genocide. ... We also respect those who support the use of force, but only in extreme situations and only when the need is clear beyond reasonable doubt, and through appropriate international organizations."

There are those here at Foundry who believe that Iraq is a case in which "unchecked aggression, tyranny and genocide" justify a military response. We respect your conviction.

There are also those of us, here at Foundry, myself included, who are not pacifists but who have not believed that this situation was extreme enough, or that all other alternatives had been explored, or that we were acting through appropriate international organizations, and thus we opposed this war. I appreciate those who have disagreed with this position but who have respected our convictions.

We don't need to agree. We do need to listen to each other and respect each other and study and pray together for greater discernment. We all need to seek God's wisdom and to continue to pray together for peace and justice for our world.

As a citizen of this nation I, like you, am struggling to understand how to exercise my rights and responsibilities as a citizen.

But I am first and foremost a follower of Jesus Christ. And, for me, the most pressing question always is this: in this time and place and situation, what does it mean to be the church of Jesus Christ?

In this time and place and situation, what does it mean to be the church of Jesus Christ?

The Scripture lesson that I had selected for today provides some interesting guidance, I think, to this question.

In Mark 3, Jesus' mother and brothers and sisters had come to take him home because there were those who said that Jesus had lost his mind ... this carpenter turned teacher, preacher and healer.

Jesus was teaching and preaching when someone came to tell him that his mother and brothers and sisters were outside, wanting to take him home.

Jesus, refusing to go, answered this way: "Who are my mother and brothers and sisters? Whoever does the will of God is my mother and my brother and my sister."

Who are our mothers and brothers and sisters? Who are our people? To whom do we belong?

It is an important question in any time and place. It is an essential question during a time of war. Who are our people? To whom do we belong? Who defines us? To whom do we owe our allegiance and loyalty? Who are our people?

If I understand the message of Jesus Christ correctly, our biological families do not define us. We love them. Sometimes we love them so much we think we hate them. We love our families, but we do not belong to them. They do not define us. They are not, finally, our people.

If we are followers of Jesus Christ, our race does not define us. There are shared cultural experiences and concerns that we may have in common with others of our race or culture, but race and culture do not finally define us. Our race is, finally, not our people.

If we are followers of Jesus Christ, our nationality or earthly citizenship does not define us. We have shared interests and shared responsibilities with other citizens of our nation, but our nationality does not define us. Our nation, finally, is not our people.

If we are followers of Christ, our gender or sexual orientation does not define us. Our social class and degrees, our fraternities and sororities, do not define us.

If we are followers of Jesus Christ, even our religion does not define us. Our religion provides us with a history and a story by which we can understand ourselves in relationship to ultimate questions, but our religious affiliation does not define us. We do not owe our ultimate loyalty and allegiance to our religion. Our religion, finally, is not our people.

Is the answer, then, that all humanity, the human race, is our people? Does our existence as a human being, in common with all other human beings, define us? Well, not really. Jesus' answer is more focused than this.

If we are followers of Jesus Christ, our people are defined and identified by the cross of Christ. Those who suffer claim our loyalty and allegiance. Those who suffer are our people.

The cross of Christ is not a symbol of religious affiliation but a symbol of suffering ... as the hymn says, an emblem of suffering and shame.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "Letters and Papers from Prison" begin with an essay in which Bonhoeffer tried to summarize what he had learned from his decade-long participation in the resistance against Hitler and Nazism. He entitled the final paragraph of his essay "The View from Below."

The question he addressed in this essay was whether the ten years of his life that he had devoted to resisting Nazism was wasted. He decided that, win or lose, the years were of great value and meaning.

"There remains an experience of incomparable value," he wrote. "We have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled - in short, from the perspective of those who suffer. The important thing is that neither bitterness nor envy should have gnawed at the heart during this time, that we should have come to look with new eyes at matters great and small, sorrow and joy, strength and weakness, that our perception of generosity, humanity, justice, and mercy should have become clearer, freer, less corruptible. We have to learn that personal suffering is a more effective key, a more rewarding principle for exploring the world in thought and action than personal good fortune."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, born an aristocrat, a patriotic citizen, a pastor of the establishment church, came to realize, because he was a follower of Jesus Christ, that the Jews of Auschwitz were his people. He came

from a close-knit family but it was not his family that defined Bonhoeffer. He was a highly educated person, but it was not his education that defined Bonhoeffer. He was a patriotic German, but it was not nation that defined Bonhoeffer.

Because he was a Christian, it was the cross that defined Bonhoeffer. And because they carried the cross, Bonhoeffer knew that the Jews of Auschwitz were his people. It changed the way he saw everything. It transformed his theology and his life.

He learned to look at the great events of history from below.

To be followers of Jesus Christ, to be the church of Jesus Christ, does not mean that we belong to a religion over against other religions. It means that we live our lives in the shadow of the cross, that we understand that it is the cross that defines us, and that those who bear the cross of Christ in our time and situation are our people.

I am concerned, these days, about what it means to be a citizen of America. Yet, I am even more concerned about what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ. Where is the cross today? Who is being crucified today? Who are the Jews of Auschwitz today? What does it mean to stand beneath the cross today?

Jesus put it this way: He said, "I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you cared for me; I was in prison and you visited me."

But Jesus when did we ever see you hungry, thirsty, naked, sick or in prison?

Jesus answers, "In as much as you did it for one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, my people, you did it for me. When you turned your back on the least of these, you turned your back on me." (Matthew 25)

Whoever is suffering today, whoever is persecuted and oppressed, whoever is outcast and suspect, maltreated and reviled, they are our people. We owe them our loyalty and our allegiance. It will be an experience of incomparable value, as Bonhoeffer said, if we are able to see the great events of world history through their eyes.

Jesus, keep us near the cross, where we will find our people.